

What Happened That Night by metal_jenny_blog

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Summary:

The dress she wore when he last saw her was torn and filthy. More dirt streaked her face, highlighting her pronounced cheekbones and sunken eyes. She swam inside a coat several sizes too large for her. The white trainers on her feet were almost black and her legs were skinny, scratches and bruises apparent on her skin.

They regarded one another quietly. Hopper kept still, afraid that if he moved too quickly, she'd vanish like a startled rabbit. He cleared his throat gently.

"Hey kid."

What Happened That Night

Hopper had dropped the food off in the box and was making his way back to his truck, when he heard the delicate sound of a twig snapping underfoot, and the puff of the new snow being disturbed.

He froze. It was probably a deer. He'd nearly hit one the other day on this same road. The bitter cold was driving them closer to the roads and people's houses as they searched for food. He'd been dropping food off for a few weeks now and he'd never seen her, despite the fact that the box was empty each time he returned.

He spun around slowly, and there she was. His hand reached up to remove his hat – an unconscious decision; he didn't trust his eyes and needed a better look.

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"Hey kid."

El continued to look at him, making no movement to suggest that she heard him.

"You ok, kid? Did you get the food?"

Wordlessly, El pulled the packet of turkey sandwiches and the wrapped Eggo's from the pocket of her voluminous jacket. She spoke. "Yes."

Hopper took a chance and stepped a little closer to her. She tensed, but didn't run.

"Do you want to eat them in the truck? It's warm." He gestured

behind him.

El rose slowly onto the balls of her feet, her thin frame looking like a bird about to take flight. She made Hopper wait for a beat before she walked forward, closing the distance between them.

“Yes.”

Hopper quickly moved to the passenger side of the truck and popped the door open. He lightly cupped her elbow to boost her into the high cabin. “There, up you go. Now, there’s a blanket in the back of the cab, I’m just going to get it.” She nodded, and he ducked around the back and lifted the door, snatching the woollen blanket he kept in there. Closing the door, he went back to the seat, where El had unwrapped the Eggos and was stuffing them into her mouth.

Hopper reached across her and tucked the blanket around her legs and folded it over her lap. He closed the passenger door and went to the driver’s side, wrenching the door open and hauling himself in. He twisted the keys in the ignition and the truck roared to life. He turned the heat up as high as it would go.

El finished the Eggos and moved onto the sandwiches. For several minutes, the only sound in the truck was El chewing and the thrum of the truck’s motor. Hopper leaned back in the seat and watched her carefully. He wondered how much water she’d had to drink. He chastised himself for not bringing any.

El finished the sandwiches and carefully folded the plastic wrap and slipped it into her pocket. She took in the space around her, drumming her fingers in her lap. She poked at the air vent in front of her, moving it left and right. Snow had started to fall again outside, dusting the hood of the truck and pooling at the bottom on the windscreen. Hopper reached out and touched her arm lightly.

“It’s too cold out there tonight. There’s more food at my place and a bed to sleep in. We can figure out what to do tomorrow. You can’t stay out there any more, you’re going to freeze to death. Does that sound ok, if I take you to my place?”

El looked at him with an expression that seemed relieved at the offer.

“Yes.”

Hopper gave her a small smile. “Let’s go.” He put the truck into gear and pulled onto the road.

Hopper was thankful that the trailer was reasonably clean. After he’d torn it apart looking for the bug several weeks ago, he had thrown out the broken furniture and trashed knickknacks and tidied up. Apart from some unwashed dishes in the sink and several ashtrays littered with spent cigarette butts, it wasn’t too bad. He’d flushed the pills down the toilet too – after everything that happened, he wanted a clear head for the future.

He ushered El inside and flipped on the lights. He quickly drew the blinds and turned the dial on the heater to banish the chill. El waited patiently while he bustled around. He pawed through a pile of clean laundry on the couch and came up with one of his oldest, softest flannel shirts and a pair of extra thick socks. He handed them to her.

“How about a hot shower? You can wear these things tonight. I’ll wash your clothes and they’ll be dry for tomorrow. Don’t worry, the trailer will be really warm in a minute.” She followed him to the bathroom where he grabbed a towel and fished a new bar of soap out of the drawer. He flipped the lid down on the toilet and placed the towel and soap on it.

El eyed the bath and shower combination warily. Hopper gestured to the shower. “You don’t have to use the bath. You’ve used a shower before, right?” She stared back at him. Hopper turned the taps on and the pipes shuddered briefly before water sputtered out. He fiddled with the knobs until the water was warm. “Alright then. When you’re done, turn the taps off this way.” He mimed turning the taps to the right. “Turn this first one, the ‘H’ off first and then the ‘C’, so you don’t burn yourself.” He touched each as he named them. Satisfied that she understood, he made his way to the door. “I’ll make us some more food, ok? Just bring your dress and other things out when you’re done.” He made to close the door.

“Don’t,” El quavered, her eyes wide. She reached towards Hopper on

the threshold of the door. “Don’t...close it.”

Hopper paused. “Oh, um...alright. I’ll just leave it ajar?” He closed it most of the way, and she nodded.

Hopper went to the kitchen, bumping the light switch with his hand as he went past. He opened the cupboard and pulled down a couple of cans of beef and vegetable soup. He put a pot on the stove and turned on a burner, opened the cans, and dumped the contents into the pot. He dialled the heat up a bit to try and heat it as quickly as possible. He turned on the grill and laid some bread slices on the tray and pushed it under the coils to toast. He opened another cupboard and pulled out plates and bowls, a tall glass for El and a coffee mug for himself. He put the coffee pot on.

He stirred the soup and thought about what he was going to do. Tonight was fine, but given that the assholes at the lab had been in his house, he wasn’t keen on El staying here for too long. She was in too much danger, given that Hopper had technically traded El’s location for Will’s. She’d obviously stayed very well hidden, but if she was hanging around with Hopper, then she wouldn’t remain off the grid for much longer.

The soup began to bubble, and he rescued the toast from the grill before it burned. He heard the water shut off in the bathroom.

He remembered his grandfather’s cabin, on the outskirts of town. He hadn’t been there in a while. He stored a few things out there, and it was a bit run down. But it had electricity, running water, it was remote – there wasn’t even a driveway up to it. It was ensconced in a clearing within a thick bracket of trees, invisible from any road.

It could work.

He quickly buttered the toast and piled it onto a plate and divided the soup into the bowls. He poured a glass of milk for El and a cup of coffee for himself and arranged everything on the table. On cue, El’s closely-cropped head peered out from the bathroom, her filthy dress and jacket piled in her arms.

“Just put it down on the floor there. I’ve got more food here, let’s

eat.”

El dropped the clothes outside the door and went to the table, pulling out a chair and sitting down. Hopper handed her a spoon and nudged the toast towards her. She took a slice of toast and watched as Hopper dipped his own slice in the bowl of soup and took a bite, and she mimicked his actions.

They ate in silence for a few moments before Hopper decided to outline his plan.

“So kid, we can stay here tonight, but tomorrow, I think we need to look at getting you somewhere safe.”

El dropped her spoon, looking stricken. She couldn’t stay here with Hopper? Why wasn’t it safe? He was a policeman, Mike told her that he would protect them when they were running from the bad men...

Hopper saw her face and hastily corrected himself. “No, wait, I meant here, in the trailer. It’s fine for tonight, but the guys at the lab know where this trailer is. We need to find a place where they don’t know where we are. We’ll stay together, don’t worry. Ok?”

El nodded. She spooned more soup into her mouth, hunched over her bowl. She eyeballed Hopper.

“What about Mike?”

Hopper finished his mouthful of toast. “We need to make sure you’re safe first. Once we do that, we can tell the others. But right now, it’s best if we keep things quiet. There’s a cabin I own that I think will work. No one knows about it. Once it’s safe, then we can think about seeing Mike and the others.” He didn’t know how long something like that would take, but he pushed that to the back of his mind. He needed to do one thing at a time.

A few minutes later, El was practically nodding off in the remnants of her soup. The warm air in the trailer was making his own eyelids heavy. He got up to clear the dishes and stacked them on the sink. El rose from her chair and Hopper led her to the back of the trailer to his bedroom.

“Sleep in here. The bed is comfy. I’ll be out on the couch, just out there.” He pulled the comforter down and El slid between the sheets. He put the lamp on. “Lamp on or off?”

“On,” she whispered, looking small and frail in the large bed. Hopper squatted by the bed.

“I’m right outside. I’m a big guy with a gun. You’re going to be fine.” He smiled reassuringly and her lips twitched upwards.

“Promise?”

“Promise. Get some sleep. We’ve got things to do tomorrow,” Hopper stood and backed out of the room. Despite her apprehension, El’s eyes were closing before he made it outside of the room.

He scooped up the dirty clothes from the floor and threw them into the washing machine. He set the cycle and went to the kitchen to clean the dishes from their dinner. He wrote some lists and organised a few things for the trip to the cabin in the morning, and when the machine finished, hung the threadbare dress near the heater to dry. First thing tomorrow, he needed to get her some new clothes.

He slipped off his flannel and undershirt, moved the pile of laundry from the couch to the floor and stretched out on the couch, pulling the blanket tossed over the back onto him. He stared at the ceiling, his thoughts racing. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself. One thing at a time. First, get her to the cabin, and go from there.

He closed his eyes. He’d know what to do tomorrow.